

Thomas Warton's  
History of  
English Poetry

# THOMAS WARTON'S HISTORY OF ENGLISH POETRY

With a new introduction  
by David Fairer

Volume I



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## P R E F A C E.

**I**N an age advanced to the highest degree of refinement, that species of curiosity commences, which is busied in contemplating the progress of social life, in displaying the gradations of science, and in tracing the transitions from barbarism to civility.

That these speculations should become the favourite pursuits, and the fashionable topics, of such a period, is extremely natural. We look back on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority; we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance: and our reflections on this subject are accompanied with a conscious pride, arising in great measure from a tacit comparison of the infinite disproportion between the feeble efforts of remote ages, and our present improvements in knowledge.

In the mean time, the manners, monuments, customs, practices, and opinions of antiquity, by forming so strong a contrast with those of our own times, and by exhibiting human nature and human inventions in new lights, in unexpected appearances, and in various forms, are objects which forcibly strike a feeling imagination.

Nor does this spectacle afford nothing more than a fruitless gratification to the fancy. It teaches us to set a just estimation on our own acquisitions; and encourages us to cherish that cultivation, which is so closely connected with the existence and the exercise of every social virtue.

On these principles, to develop the dawning of genius, and to pursue the progress of our national poetry, from a rude origin and obscure beginnings, to its perfection in a polished age, must prove an interesting and instructive investigation. But a history of poetry, for another reason, yet on the same principles, must be more especially productive of entertainment and utility. I mean, as it is an art, whose object is human society: as it has the peculiar merit, in its operations on that object, of faithfully recording the features of the times, and of preserving

erving the most picturesque and expressive representations of manners: and, because the first monuments of composition in every nation are those of the poet, as it possesses the additional advantage of transmitting to posterity genuine delineations of life in its simplest stages. Let me add, that anecdotes of the rudiments of a favourite art will always be particularly pleasing. The more early specimens of poetry must ever amuse, in proportion to the pleasure which we receive from its finished productions.

Much however depends on the execution of such a design, and my readers are to decide in what degree I have done justice to so specious and promising a disquisition. Yet a few more words will not be perhaps improper, in vindication, or rather in explanation, of the manner in which my work has been conducted. I am sure I do not mean, nor can I pretend, to apologise for its defects.

I have chose to exhibit the history of our poetry in a chronological series: not distributing my matter into detached articles, of periodical divisions, or of general heads. Yet I have not always adhered so scrupulously to the regularity of annals, but that I

have often deviated into incidental digressions ; and have sometimes stopped in the course of my career, for the sake of recapitulation, for the purpose of collecting scattered notices into a single and uniform point of view, for the more exact inspection of a topic which required a separate consideration, or for a comparative survey of the poetry of other nations.

A few years ago, Mr. MASON, with that liberality which ever accompanies true genius, gave me an authentic copy of Mr. POPE's scheme of a History of English Poetry, in which our poets were classed under their supposed respective schools. The late lamented Mr. GRAY had also projected a work of this kind, and translated some Runic odes for its illustration, now published : but soon relinquishing the prosecution of a design, which would have detained him from his own noble inventions, he most obligingly condescended to favour me with the substance of his plan, which I found to be that of Mr. POPE, considerably enlarged, extended, and improved.

It is vanity in me to have mentioned these communications. But I am apprehensive my vanity will justly be thought much greater, when it shall appear, that in giving the history of English poetry,  
I have

I have rejected the ideas of men who are its most distinguished ornaments. To confess the real truth, upon examination and experiment, I soon discovered their mode of treating my subject, plausible as it is, and brilliant in theory, to be attended with difficulties and inconveniencies, and productive of embarrassment both to the reader and the writer. Like other ingenious systems, it sacrificed much useful intelligence to the observance of arrangement; and in the place of that satisfaction which results from a clearness and a fulness of information, seemed only to substitute the merit of disposition, and the praise of contrivance. The constraint imposed by a mechanical attention to this distribution, appeared to me to destroy that free exertion of research with which such a history ought to be executed, and not easily reconcilable with that complication, variety, and extent of materials, which it ought to comprehend.

The method I have pursued, on one account at least, seems preferable to all others. My performance, in its present form, exhibits without transposition the gradual improvements of our poetry, at the same time that it uniformly represents the progression of our language.

Some perhaps will be of opinion, that these annals ought to have commenced with a view of the Saxon poetry. But besides that a legitimate illustration of that jejune and intricate subject would have almost doubled my labour, that the Saxon language is familiar only to a few learned antiquaries, that our Saxon poems are for the most part little more than religious rhapsodies, and that scarce any compositions remain marked with the native images of that people in their pagan state, every reader that reflects but for a moment on our political establishment must perceive, that the Saxon poetry has no connection with the nature and purpose of my present undertaking. Before the Norman accession, which succeeded to the Saxon government, we were an unformed and an unsettled race. That mighty revolution obliterated almost all relation to the former inhabitants of this island; and produced that signal change in our policy, constitution, and public manners, the effects of which have reached modern times. The beginning of these annals seems therefore to be most properly dated from that era, when our national character began to dawn.

It was recommended to me, by a person eminent in the republic of letters, totally to exclude from  
these

these volumes any mention of the English drama. I am very sensible that a just history of our Stage is alone sufficient to form an entire and extensive work; and this argument, which is by no means precluded by the attempt here offered to the public, still remains separately to be discussed, at large, and in form. But as it was professedly my intention to comprise every species of English Poetry, this, among the rest, of course claimed a place in these annals, and necessarily fell into my general design. At the same time, as in this situation it could only become a subordinate object, it was impossible I should examine it with that critical precision and particularity, which so large, so curious, and so important an article of our poetical literature demands and deserves. To have considered it in its full extent, would have produced the unwieldy excrescence of a disproportionate episode: not to have considered it at all, had been an omission, which must detract from the integrity of my intended plan. I flatter myself however, that from evidences hitherto unexplored, I have recovered hints which may facilitate the labours of those, who shall hereafter be inclined to investigate the antient state of dramatic exhibition in this country, with due comprehension and accuracy.

It will probably be remarked, that the citations in the first volume are numerous, and sometimes very prolix. But it should be remembered, that most of these are extracted from antient manuscript poems never before printed, and hitherto but little known. Nor was it easy to illustrate the darker and more distant periods of our poetry, without producing ample specimens. In the mean time, I hope to merit the thanks of the antiquarian, for enriching the stock of our early literature by these new accessions: and I trust I shall gratify the reader of taste, in having so frequently rescued from oblivion the rude inventions and irregular beauties of the heroic tale, or the romantic legend.

The design of the DISSERTATIONS is to prepare the reader, by considering apart, in a connected and comprehensive detail, some material points of a general and preliminary nature, and which could not either with equal propriety or convenience be introduced, at least not so formally discussed, in the body of the book; to establish certain fundamental principles to which frequent appeals might occasionally be made, and to clear the way for various observations arising in the course of my future enquiries.

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## THE FORMATION OF WARTON'S *HISTORY*

In this facsimile edition, Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* appears complete for the first time. Complete, though not of course completed. The work was published in three volumes, 1774 (2nd edn 1775), 1778 and 1781.<sup>1</sup> At Warton's death in 1790 eleven sheets of a fourth volume had been printed off, and these eighty-eight pages were released to the public over a decade later. The autograph manuscript of a 4,800-word continuation discussing the Elizabethan sonnet sequence survives at Winchester and was edited by Rodney M. Baine in 1953.<sup>2</sup>

The present edition gathers all this material together. Volume IV comprises the eighty-eight printed pages of Warton's fourth volume, plus a facsimile and transcript of the Winchester continuation, and a reproduction of William Fillingham's index to the *History* published in 1806. I have supplemented this with appendices that show different stages of Warton's work: extracts from his notebooks represent his earliest researches in literary history during the 1750s, an early MS draft of part of Volume III shows him preparing a section of the published *History*, and in some pages from the proof copies of Volumes II and III we see Warton at work on the text at its final stage.

The aim of the following introduction is to convey something of the nature and significance of the *History* by examining how it came into being, and why it took on its particular shape and character. From this viewpoint, what Warton declined or failed to do is as important as what he strove to do. The volumes are stamped throughout with his individual character and tastes, but they are also the product of contradictions within the literary world of the time.

## INTRODUCTION

### THOMAS WARTON

The future Poet Laureate and literary historian was born on 9 January 1728 in Basingstoke, Hampshire. He was the younger son of Thomas Warton the Elder, a fellow of Magdalen College Oxford and Professor of Poetry, who had married and left the university for a college living as Vicar of Basingstoke and Headmaster of the Grammar School. Unlike his elder brother Joseph, who attended Winchester College (and eventually became its Headmaster), Thomas was educated at home and at his father's school, and in 1744 he entered Trinity College Oxford, a place that would be his home for the rest of his life. By the time he had proceeded through the B.A. and M.A. degrees and had gained a college fellowship (1752), Warton had already published six volumes of verse, and thanks to *The Triumph of Isis* (1750) he was regarded as the university's unofficial poetic champion. His reputation grew with the inclusion of his work in the 1748 and 1755 volumes of Dodsley's *Collection of Poems*, and he was the natural choice to succeed William Hawkins as Oxford's Poetry Professor in 1756.

Warton's curiosity about literary history was fed by his early researches in the Oxford libraries, and these culminated in *Observations on the Faerie Queene* (1754; 2nd edn 1762). His interests, however, were many-sided. As professor he lectured for ten years on the poetry of the Greeks and published a two-volume edition of *Theocritus* (1770). But many thought it incongruous that such a prominent university figure relished the 'low' company of the Oxford taverns where he could indulge his waggish humour with a pipe and glass. He was a member of the Jelly-Bag Club, a group that met for drink and puns at secret venues around the university, and his collection of humorous verse by himself and friends, *The Oxford Sausage* (1764), was often reprinted. Another popular work was *A Companion to the Guide* (1760), a humorous supplement to the official Oxford guidebook which takes the visitor on a tour of the 'low life' of the city: the Oxford of the tennis court, race track, coffee house, and other social and architectural curiosities. Warton was a famous Oxford 'character', renowned for his good-humoured puns, his vast historical erudition, his Latin verse, his Gothic enthusiasms and his untidy dress.

Warton's driving-force was a fascination with the past, and throughout his life he pursued various aspects of historical study. His biographies of two Trinity men, *The Life and Literary Remains of Ralph Bathurst* (2 vols, 1761) and *The Life of Sir Thomas Pope* (1772; 2nd edn 1780), have too much literary and anecdotal material to be mere works of piety; his *Description of the City, College, and Cathedral of Winchester* (1760)

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is an early example of his absorption in the medieval world based on his own observations and researches, and likewise his *Specimen of a Parochial History of Oxfordshire* (1781), one of the pioneering works of parochial history, uses local records and archaeological remains to tell the story of the parish of Kiddington, of which he became Rector in 1771. *The History of English Poetry* is the work of someone well versed in historical research among primary documents, for whom literary history was not radically different from his other historical studies. It was partly for his work as the historian of poetry that he was elected Oxford's Camden Professor of History in 1785.

For many years Warton was also planning a 'History of Gothic Architecture in England', and the enjoyable fieldwork was carried out during his summer rambles, when he would explore medieval ruins and make notes and drawings of them. Historical interests like these found their way into some of the odes, elegies and sonnets that he continued to write during his forties, and which were collected in *Poems. A New Edition, with Additions*, published in March 1777 (3rd edn 1779). In 1782 he published *Verses on Sir Joshua Reynolds's Painted Window at New-College Oxford*, in which his classical and Gothic tastes encounter each other. Reynolds's friendship was partly instrumental in Warton's being made Poet Laureate in 1785. His twice-yearly official odes celebrate the British landscape and British traditions, and they are stamped with Warton's keen sense of continuity between past and present. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in the year of Warton's death, was one of several major works of the Romantic period that show his influence.

In the last years of his life Warton was able to enjoy the recognition that had come his way. In Oxford he was surrounded by a circle of young romantically-minded poets such as Henry Headley, Thomas Russell and William Lisle Bowles, who marked themselves out as his protégés by their loose stockings and poetical aspirations; and during his visits to London the historian of English poetry attended literary salons and an occasional levée, but was happier dining at The Club with Boswell, Reynolds, Burke and Malone.

After the publication of Volume III of *The History of English Poetry* (1781), Warton's literary scholarship found other channels. He never entirely ceased to work on his major project, but distraction from it became easier once he reached the close of the Elizabethan period. The Chatterton controversy, which came to a head the following year, caused him to set aside the *History* and engage in the public debate surrounding the supposed fifteenth-century poems of Thomas Rowley. Warton's deep knowledge of medieval literature did not allow him to be

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convinced by them, and his *Enquiry into the Authenticity of the Poems Attributed to Thomas Rowley* (1782) was a decisive contribution to their exposure. As a reader, however, he loved the poems, and the *History* devotes a whole section to them, while arguing that they are fabrications. The second larger project was an edition of Milton's *Poems upon Several Occasions* (1785) which included those works 'Comus', 'Lycidas', 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' in which he had delighted since his early years as a poet. He returned to the *History* for a while, but died while the enlarged second edition of Milton was at press.

Poet, historian, classical scholar, Gothic enthusiast, editor, biographer, humorist, Warton was all of these, and his *History of English Poetry* is at different points marked by each aspect of his life and personality. He was one of the leading literary figures of an age when the 'literary' was not so circumscribed as it has since become, and the capaciousness of the *History* expresses a mind that delighted in study of all kinds. As Warton remarked in *A Companion to the Guide*: 'Scholars are a merrier Sett of People than the World is apt to imagine'.<sup>3</sup>

## LITERARY HISTORY BEFORE WARTON

In 1772 William Barrett, the Bristol antiquary, remarked to his friend Andrew Coltee Ducarel that there was generally held to be no writer between Chaucer and Spenser entitled to the name of poet. Ducarel replied:

who knows that? who hath particularly looked into this branch of literature? The world is indeed much obliged to the learned Dr. Percy for his *Reliques of Antient Poetry*. But is there nothing else left amongst us of that kind? have all the old MSS on that subject in the libraries of the two universities, in the Cotton, Harleian, &c. &c. been examined? The contrary is known to be true; and, till that is done, the question must remain undecided.<sup>4</sup>

It may seem strange that a knowledgeable scholar like Ducarel, Keeper of the Lambeth Library, should express such a general ignorance of English literary history, but his words remind us of the context within which Thomas Warton was working. Two years later, with the publication of the first volume of his *History of English Poetry* Ducarel's questions began to be answered. Warton's contribution to literary history was first to bring a great deal of unknown material to light.

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Whatever scholarly work had been done before him, Warton was no mere arranger of other men's materials, but an investigator and interpreter in his own right. He immersed himself in primary sources, and brought them before the public in an engaging and fascinating way. As a combination of scholar and critic he was of a new breed, and only Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) had a comparable impact.

However, in order for the heading 'Literary History *before* Warton' to make any sense at all, we have to dismantle the concept of literary history as we understand it today. That was Warton's contribution. *The History of English Poetry* replaced the old encyclopedic and taxonomic approaches (dictionaries, bibliographies, anthologies or diagrams of literary 'schools') with the first narrative of literary history from the Conquest to the end of the sixteenth century, but it remained indebted to the scholarly works which over the centuries had helped establish the facts (or errors) about the early poets and dramatists.<sup>5</sup> From the sixteenth century on, scholars had concerned themselves with accumulating names, dates and attributions, and works like John Leland's *Commentarii de Scriptoribus Britannicis* (written about 1545 and edited by Anthony Hall in 1709), and John Bale's two catalogues *Illustrium Maioris Britanniae scriptorum summarium* (1548) and his later *Catalogus* (1557-9) frequently occur in the *History's* footnotes. Biographical dictionaries and lists of poets and dramatists proliferated after the Restoration, and the eighteenth-century literary scholar would regularly need to consult books like William Winstanley's anecdotal catalogue of authors, *Lives of the most Famous English Poets* (1687), Gerard Langbaine's *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (1691), Sir Thomas Pope Blount's *Censura celebriorum authorum* (1690) and his *De Re Poetica* (1694). Other works of patriotism or matriotism like Thomas Fuller's *Worthies of England* (1662) and Anthony Wood's compendious *Athenae Oxonienses* (1691-2; new edn 1721) included biographies of poets within their scope. The gathering and ordering of knowledge was essential, but the ordering never got beyond listing or categorizing. For men like Percy and Warton, however, these books gave useful points of reference that helped establish a chronology of literary history. Some of them tended to circulate in annotated form and be built upon by other scholars: Percy's heavily annotated copy of Wood's *Athenae*, now in the library of Queen's University Belfast, testifies to its value as a source book; a text by Fuller containing Oldys's notes passed from Steevens to Malone; and Winstanley and Langbaine were frequently interleaved and annotated in the eighteenth century. Percy possessed interleaved copies of both, and Malone owned a Winstanley annotated by Oldys. Percy's four-

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volume interleaved Langbaine, into which he had transcribed the notes from Oldys's copy, was lent to Warton in 1769.<sup>6</sup>

If the various dictionaries and catalogues represent the scholarly-antiquarian side of literary history, the subject was being introduced to the general reader in more 'polite' form through anthologies. A significant collection of this more elegant kind was Thomas Hayward's *The British Muse* (3 vols London, 1738), whose subtitle characterizes its approach: 'a collection of Thoughts moral, natural and sublime of our English Poets who flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . . . . The whole digested alphabetically'. Warton's praise of Hayward's volumes as 'the most comprehensive and exact COMMON-PLACE of the works of our most eminent poets throughout the reign of queen Elisabeth, and afterwards' specifically highlights its genre.<sup>7</sup> The most influential anthology of older poetry was Elizabeth Cooper's *The Muses' Library; Or a Series of English Poetry* (1737), a collection intermixed with snippets of biography and criticism.<sup>8</sup> When Warton in his early years of research was toying with the anthology format for his 'Select Pieces', it was against Cooper's that he measured his own: 'Mrs Cooper's Scheme merely Historical—', he notes, 'My Design to revive *obscure* & antient Merit. Allegorizing & correctness different things'.<sup>9</sup> Cooper's collection intended to chart poetry's rise from barbarism to modern perfection, and be 'a Sort of *Poetical Chronicle*: which begins with the first Dawning of polite Literature in *England*, and is propos'd to be continu'd to the highest Perfection, it has hitherto attain'd' (*The Muses' Library*, p. ix). But for Warton, 'Allegorizing & correctness' were 'different things'. Already he was beginning to glimpse ways in which his view of the literary past was to be less confident of progress.

Both Hayward's and Cooper's anthologies were compiled with the assistance of William Oldys, for a time Harleian Librarian and later general editor of *Biographia Britannica*, whose researches found their way into the work of many later scholars, including Warton. For Lawrence Lipking, Oldys exemplifies an 'Age of Diligence' that accumulated the materials for a literary history it could not write. His fastidious work as a researcher filtered down to others through 'manuscript annotations and notes, his compilations and prefaces, his abstracts and digests and catalogues, the remnants of his verbal and epistolary communications'.<sup>10</sup> Oldys *could* have taken on the challenge of writing a history of poetry, but as Lipking says, '[w]hether his critical powers would have proved equal to the task is at least dubious; the correspondent in the *Gentleman's Magazine* who charges that "He was an excellent picker-up of facts and materials, but had [little power] of arranging them, or connecting them